



A qualitative exploration of the correspondence of parental patterns across generations.

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study qualitatively explores the experiences of mothers and adult children in order to gain insight into the proposition that parental patterns are intergenerationally transmitted, as indicated in existing research (Hesse, 1999). Opportunity sampling was utilised to recruited three mothers and three adult children. Questions from the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) were adopted in the form of a semi-structured interview to explore participant's experiences of childhood and parenting. The collected data was rigorously analysed using thematic analysis following the six phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Three key themes emerged: security and proximity, growth and individuation, trying to create a reparative experience. Concluding findings suggest an intergenerational transmission of parental patterns and contribute to the existing literature. Additionally, it was found that adverse childhood experiences might lead to individuals consciously wanting to not follow their caregiver's parenting. Findings can be applied to clinical contexts; future research proposals have been discussed.

KEY WORDS:	ATTACHMENT	THEMATIC ANALYSIS	INTERGENERATIONAL	PATTERNS	PARENTING
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## **Introduction**

### **Attachment in everyday life**

Attachment (Bowlby, 1973) is all around us- from birth, we are biologically predisposed to form relationships with those who provide us with security and comfort. Humans have evolved to instinctively form relationships with those in close proximity (Golding, 2008). Attachment relationships are important across the lifespan (Barrett, 2006) and are present in peer and sexual relationships (Parkes, 1991). The wealth of research into this field suggests that the type of attachment formed in early childhood impacts one's mental health; for example, a securely attached child is least susceptible to pathology (Main, 2000). Therefore, attachment theory highlights the crucial nature of understanding, how to form rewarding and secure attachments in early childhood. There is emphasis put on the quality of the caregiver, in most cases - the mother (Cassidy and Shaver, 2016). Before attachment theory, the role of the mother was limited to feeding the child and housework.

Attachment theory is applicable in various settings in society, utilised within child custody cases; where attachments are assessed using first-hand observations of child and parent- to inform court decisions. In such circumstances, the well-being of the child is considered, where separation from the primary-caregiver is a possibility (Woolfson, 2014). Moreover, research on attachment has been used in fostering and care cases, where children have a history of inadequate parenting and separation from family. Research evidence helps make sense of children's behaviour (Golding, 2008) and provision the decision-making process of placements to reduce risks posed. Additionally, the theory helps the development of training for carers (Crittenden, 2014; Barrett, 2006). Society aims to maximise positive attachment outcomes for children (Loveless and Holman, 2007); e.g. by re-examining policies of parental leave which require parents to return to work shortly after childbirth (Cassidy et al, 2013). Moreover, there are a number of parent-infant clinics such as the Anna Freud centre, and therapies based of attachment theory.

## **Literature Review**

### **Attachment Theory**

Attachment theory was pioneered by Bowlby who defines attachment as "the lasting psychological connectedness between human beings" (Bowlby, 1969:64) and centres around making the child feel safe, protected and secure (Bowlby, 1973;1982). Keeping primary care-givers in close proximity, infants develop attachment behaviours, such as crying, these behaviours when grouped are defined as the attachment behavioural system (Bowlby 1969;1982). The parent responds through the activation of the caregiving system; parental behaviours such as soothing (Bowlby, 1969; 1982). In this way, during distress, the caregiver is the safe haven, which functions by restoring the feeling of security through providing emotional comfort (Feeney and Woodhouse, 2016). The primary care-giver also acts as the secure base from which the child can explore, with the support of the parent,

knowing in distress they will be available. Exploration is important as it enhances personal growth (Bretherton, 1992). Optimal care leads to a secure attachment, whereas suboptimal to an insecure attachment, which can compromise the child's sense of security and negatively affect their development (Priddis, 2006)-signifying the importance of the relationship.

Through extensive research, Ainsworth developed an observational attachment measure- Strange Situation Procedure (SSP) (1969), which tests the child's security through the mother's absence, the 'separation', assigning one of four attachment types to the child: secure, insecure, avoidant or ambivalent. The study observes the impact of maternal sensitivity and insensitivity on the quality of the relationship (Bretherton, 1990). Ainsworth's findings offer empirical evidence for Bowlby's theory, revealing that young children attempt to stay in protective ranges of their primary care-giver. During times of threat, the children seek physical contact and proximity to feel safe, instilling security within the child. In separation, the child protests leading to this type of behaviour (Golding, 2008). Adult attachment can be measured using the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) (George, Kaplan, & Main, 1985), which reveals the inner working model of attachment (Bretherton, 1990). SSP and AAI have similar systematic associations (Fonagy, 1991), used together when comparing attachments of mother and infant.

### **Internal Working Models**

Early experiences create the internal working models (IWMs) which have the role of storing, passing on and manipulating information (Bowlby, 1969;1982). IWMs are cognitive schemas of the self and others and are shaped by experiences (Bretherton and Munholland, 2016). The core of internal working models is created by expectations, predicting how the caregiver will respond depending on the individual's changing goals and needs (Bretherton and Munholland, 2016). Through these mechanisms, interactions with primary care-givers become internalised (Bowlby, 1973). These patterns- internal representations are likely to be enforced onto future relationships; by forming a template for latter bonds. Therefore, early relationships provide a base for future ones (Bowlby, 1998) and act as predictors of romantic and parent relationships (Golding, 2008). Consequently, through attachment, we learn about parenting. For instance, one with an early experience of a responsive parent in time of distress will construct positive expectations of an attachment figure.

### **Attachment across the lifespan**

The processes of attachment continues to stay critical across the lifespan, despite the change in organisation (Crowell et al, 2016; Cicchetti et al, 1990). Attachment plays an active role during adolescence where psychosocial development occurs causing "profound changes in the meaning and expression of attachment-related cognition, behaviour, and affect." (Allen and Tan, 2016:399). Research links adolescence to conflict in the relationship (Paikoff and Brooks-Gunn, 1991). Dependence on the primary care-giver decreases as adolescents develop abilities, as exploration adopts a fundamental role over attachment behaviours. However, parents remain providers of a secure base and in distress; the attachment system activates (Rosenthal and Kobak, 2010). Secure attachment still holds great importance and is associated with well-being (Cosadine et al, 2013). The norm is to

perceive the parent as the caregiver and child as the care seeker, but the roles may reverse in adulthood when the adult child may become the adult caregiver, due to the aged parent (Magai, Frias and Shaver, 2016). Still, findings suggest this hierarchical change does not affect the parent-child attachment (Diehl et al, 1998).

### **Intergenerational transmissions of parental patterns**

Furthermore, attachment theory is empirically grounded in regards to parenting (Benoit, 2004). Positive parenting is a predictor of the child's social and emotional development (Zhou et al, 2002) and academic success (Chen and Kaplan, 2001). Growing evidence suggests that the type of parenting received in one generation is likely to correspond in the next.

The intergenerational transmissions of parenting concerns influencing, intentionally or unintentionally the parenting behaviours of the next generation (van IJzendoorn, 1992). Serbin and Karp (2003) claim the nature and quality of parenting is passed down because one generation will parent in similar ways to one's experiences. This was first proposed by Bowlby (1973) claiming that rejecting parents are likely to have suffered adverse relations in childhood resulting in patterns of parenting to be transmitted across generations. There is a wealth of research suggesting intergenerational transmission of parental patterns (Conger et al, 2009; Neppl et al, 2009; van IJzendoorn, 1992; Fonagy, 2010).

While majority of literature focuses on the correspondence of negative parenting patterns, e.g. neglect or abuse (Spinetta and Rigler, 1972; Belsky, 1978), recent studies find intergenerational continuity of positive and secure parenting patterns. This is demonstrated in Belsky's (2005) longitudinal study of 200 New Zealand participants assessed at various life stages. To determine whether past childbearing experiences predicts warm and sensitive parenting, parents were videotaped interacting with their 3 year old children-, which the findings confirmed. As well as displaying similar levels of care to which they received, participants who experienced openly communicative and positive attachment in their adolescence predicted to act alike when parenting, demonstrating intergenerational transmissions. Due to its longitudinal nature, the study is high in validity- allowing the identification of developmental trends. However, it is limited due to cultural bias as the findings are from New Zealand and cannot be generalised to the wider population; what the parenting techniques defined as 'warm and sensitive' in New Zealand may not be the same as the UK. This echoes Chen and Kaplan's (2001) findings of intergenerational transmissions of constructive parenting. This can be explained by De Wolff et al's (1997) findings that secure mother's parenting is characterised as more sensitive, protective and responsive, leading the child's development of a secure bond and subsequently creating a positive mental representation of attachment.

This has been built on by Fonagy's (1991) study investigating whether the mental representations of attachment held by pregnant women predict the parent-child attachment a year later- finding 75% of mothers successfully predict their child's attachment. This implies mother's mental representations of attachment influence the child's attachment to her. This is further supported by van IJzendoorn's (1995) meta-analysis also showing 75% of mothers and infants had matching secure attachments. Consistent number of statistical similarities in literature indicate a

strong pattern in the mother-infant attachments and shows the reliability of the source. Hesse's (1999) review of past literature, across cultures, adds credibility to the claim that parental patterns transmit across generations by finding a strong correspondence between infant and mother attachment classifications. This highlights that transmission of parental patterns is not limited by culture. Research has gone beyond these findings, finding patterns across three generations e.g. Benoit and Parker (1994), more recently in a replicate study with similar findings by Hautamaki et al (2010). While a majority unconsciously or consciously follow in their parents parenting styles, in some cases, individuals are known to parent in different ways to one's experiences. This has been illustrated in maltreated children who wish to be better parents than their own (Aparicio, 2017) perceiving parenting as a reparative process (Maxwell et al, 2011; Pryce and Samuels, 2010).

## **The Present Study**

Collectively, the body of research reviewed above indicates that mental representations of attachment relationships mediates one's future parenting behaviour. Parenting also holds significant importance to a healthy development and emotional well-being. Therefore, it is crucial to gain further insight into the continuation of attachment relationships across generations. While majority of previous studies use the parent-infant cohort, this study aims to fill the gap in research by exploring the parent and adult child sample. The measure of AAI will be implemented, as used in reviewed literature, however, not for both generations. The measure will help reveal the IWMs of attachment relationships. The qualitative nature of the study aims to gain insight into the meaning's individuals give to experiences of childhood and parenting (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

## **Research Question**

This present study aims to explore whether there are parental patterns that correspond across generations by observing the experiences of adult children and mothers. From these aims, a research question was derived: *'Are there intergenerational transmissions of parental patterns?'*

## **Methodology**

### **Rationale and Approach**

The present study aims to explore whether there are parenting patterns across generations through the experiences of mothers and adult children. The study draws on Bowlby's theory of attachment (1973).

### **Methodology and Design**

Qualitative research was selected as the appropriate research method for the chosen topic. This interpretive approach is claimed applicable when there is not much known about the participants (Field and Morse, 1985), applicable in this study. The study takes an inductive approach creating theory directly out of data (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). The data collected viewed participant's first-person accounts of experience, focusing on their accounts of childhood and parenting. Qualitative

research aims to provide rich descriptive accounts (Geertz, 1973) of topics explored (Smith, 2015). In qualitative research, interviews attempt to gain an insight into the world of the participant (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009) and search for social meaning given to experiences.

One on one interviews help explore individual experience, while producing large amounts of rich and detailed data (Willig, 2013; Banister et al, 2011), therefore, a semi-structured interview was selected as the appropriate method. The interview was influenced and adapted from the Adult Attachment interview (AAI) (George et al, 1985). Kvale and Brinkman (2009) describe it as an 'inter-view' in which knowledge is made in the 'inter-action' between the researcher and the participant; an 'inter-change' of views between two people about a common theme. A research interview, a professional conversation, is known to have a power asymmetry between the researcher and participant. This is because the interviewer has scientific competence and possesses the power in selecting a research topic, which the questions are shaped around. The interview is a means for providing the researcher with a narrative to interpret (Kvale and Brinkman, 2015). The researcher defines and controls the interview by introducing the research topic and asking questions (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009).

After a review of the existing research literature on the topic of attachment, it was decided that the questions from the AAI (George et al, 1985) would be used, similarly to previous research (Fonagy, 2010). AAI is a semi-structured interview composed of twenty questions, which explore adult representation of attachment through questions about childhood. It aims to access the unconscious by bringing back individuals to emotional times (George et al, 1985.) AAI is seen as a valuable clinical tool used in a variety of settings, such as social work, clinical psychology and psychiatry. It is an established coding system, which identifies the type of attachment of the participant through discourse analysis (Steele and Steele, 2008). The AAI has been used in a variety of contexts, for example, to investigate whether the rates of AAI security reduce with personal disadvantages such as deafness (van IJzendoorn and Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2008), finding they do not. Furthermore, to assess attachment statuses of couples looking to adopt children, finding majority were secure (Santona and Zavattini, 2005). The current study utilizes two questions of the AAI, question 19: *'Is there any particular thing which you feel you learned above all from your own childhood experiences? I'm thinking here of something you feel you might have gained from the kind of childhood you had'* and question 20: *'what would you hope your child (or, your imagined child) might have learned from his/her experiences of being parented by you?'* (George et al, 1985). These questions will be repeated for two generations to investigate the ideas linked to parenting and explore the possible intergenerational transmissions of parental patterns, helping reveal the conscious and unconscious workings of the IWM.

The data was analysed using thematic analysis (TA). Due to its theoretical freedom, TA delivers a useful and flexible research tool, which can provide rich and detailed data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). TA is flexible and can be used in wide range of approaches in qualitative research (Smith, 2015). In view of this, TA was considered a suitable method for data analysis.

## **Ethics**

This research study followed the British Psychological Society's Code of Ethics and Conduct (2018) and that of the Manchester Metropolitan University. The participant signed a participant information sheet (appendix 1) and a consent form (appendix 2). Participant anonymity was maintained through the notation of P and AC.

## **Participants**

The participants were recruited using opportunity sampling; using those agreeable to take part in the study. The criteria for this research study were adult children over the age of 18 and their mothers. The participants were known to the researcher. In total, six participants were recruited- three mothers and three adult children. Small samples help collect in-depth data and depth (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). The sample used male and female adult children, university students, ages over 20. The mothers in this study were aged between 42 and 60, from varied cultural backgrounds. The participants live in the south of England. The participant received information sheets and signed consent forms agreeing to participate in the research study.

## **Data Collection**

After gaining ethical approval from the MMU Ethics Committee (appendix 3), the study commenced. The interviews took place in informal settings- homes of the participants. This allowed the participant to relax during of the interview, in turn answering questions more openly. Before the interview, the researcher devised an interview agenda (appendix 4); composed of two questions, from the AAI (Kaplan et al, 1985) and set of probes- prepared in reference to the topics of interest. Six interviews were conducted. Questions were added based on the participants' responses. The interviews ranged in length, from 25 to 45 minutes and were recorded using a mobile phone and later transcribed verbatim. Braun and Clarke (2013) suggest that around 5/6 interviews in a small research project such as an undergraduate project is a sufficient amount.

## **Analysis**

Once the data was collected and transcribed, TA was carried out, following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach to coding and theme development (2006). This method of analysis is widely used to identify, analyse and report patterns in data (Boyatzis, 1998). The first phase of analysis was familiarization with the data, by rereading the transcripts to help researcher move analysis beyond the obvious meaning (Smith, 2015). Codes were produced by recognising key words and themes for each line (related to research question) e.g. in P3's extract, the code for line 54 was 'comforting'. A coded transcript can be found in the appendix (5). Themes have been defined as recurrent and distinctive features of the participants' account, which characterise experiences, are relevant to the research question (King and Horrocks, 2010). Thirdly, identification of themes- words/ phrases which brought together codes helping answer the research question, one theme found was 'growth and individuation'. Themes were reviewed and limited to three, then defined. Lastly, the report was written. Analytical conductions were made across the themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006).



## Analysis and Discussion

Three main themes emerged from the transcripts:

- Security and proximity
- Growth and individuation
- Trying to create reparative experiences

### Theme 1: Security and proximity

A theme heavily expressed across the data, was the feeling of security and proximity in attachment. Security and proximity are key concepts of attachment theory and characterise an optimal secure bond (Bowlby, 1969; 1982). This is demonstrated in accounts of parents (P) and their adult children (AC).

<p><u>P3 on her childhood:</u>  <i>"However big changes had arrived I never felt that it was terrible because I felt safe in their love."</i>            (24-25)</p> <p><u>On her as a parent:</u>  <i>"I would hope that he would feel that we are always here [...] feels secure in our love"</i>            (156-157)</p>	<p><u>AC3 on childhood:</u>  <i>"Mum was always there"</i>            (26)</p> <p><i>"Sometimes I would get really nervous, about not having my mum nearby, sometimes I would get really upset and get homesick, and cry my eyes out and beg to call my mum."</i> (49-52)</p>
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Above, P3's childhood account reveals that in distressing circumstances, such as her parent's divorce, she would not be left feeling anxious due to the feelings of safety that they had created. P3 sees her parents as a source of safety; a safe haven, which she can turn to, rely on. When speaking about herself as a parent, she indicates hopes for her child to feel secure, similarly, to how she felt. *'Always there'* is repeated several times about her mother. Similarly, her child (AC3 as seen above) shows a correspondence of this parental proximity in repetition of the same phrase. Provided with the optimal level of availability, P3 has internalised such behaviours and projected them in her own parenting, suggesting a pattern between P3's parenting and her mothers, going in line with an influential review of studies conducted by Hesse (1999) which found parental security is transmitted due to correlations in mother's and infant's attachment types.

In the excerpt above, AC3 gives an account of experiencing separation anxiety from his mother when attending sleepovers. This novel situation is perceived as a threat. Longing to be reunited with his mother at home, he describes displaying attachment behaviours such as crying. According to Bowlby (1969; 1982) when separation is felt the attachment behavioural system activates, shown here in the protest behaviours which display AC3 attempting to seek proximity and return to the protective ranges of his mother. This highlights the mother's role of a secure base, which the child returns

to as a source of comfort and security (Water and Cummings, 2000). AC3 confirms this in saying that upon reunion his mother would “*comfort me and reassure me*” (63). Soothing or retrieving child from a distressing situation, as seen here, shows the activation of the caregiving system (Bowlby, 1969; 1982). By giving AC3 emotional comfort and restoring feeling of security, P3 plays the effective caregiver (Feeney and Woodhouse, 2016), which mirrors her mother’s availability during a distressing period. This indicates a correspondence in the pair.

AC1 speaks of childhood:

*“If I had nightmares, I would wet the bed on purpose cos then I could get to sleep with her [...] feel safer in bed with her”*  
(141-142)

Participants consistently reported the desire to be in close proximity with their attachment figures, establishing the mother as a secure base. This is seen in AC1’s discourse on the left, showing just how much she “*didn’t want to be apart from [her] mum*” (65). There are similarities across all transcripts in terms of security to their mother.

A similar pattern of secure intergenerational transmissions of parenting can be seen between P2 and AC2.

P2 on her childhood:

*“She was always there, listening, talking to me (.) Always there for me, whatever she was doing.”* (76-77)  
*“always looked at my relationship with my mum and tried to be the mum she was”*  
(162-163)

AC2 on her childhood:

*“When I suffered from anxiety, she was understanding and very supportive (.) So, I want my parenting to be a reflection of hers – also in having no restrictions...having freedom”*  
(192-194)

Presented above, a feature of P2’s narrative about her mother is the emphasis on her unchanging availability, through reference to her communication. Consistent experiences of care, such as a mother ‘*always*’ being there (a secure base), become internalised (Bowlby, 1973). P2’s IWMs have provided her with expectations for the type of caregiver she should be to AC2 (Bowlby, 1988; 1998); following the pattern of parenting she received. This is mirrored in AC2’s struggle with anxiety, which P2 recognises as distressing causing an activation of the caregiving system (Bowlby, 1969; 1982). This leads to sensitive responsiveness to AC2’s needs by providing comfort, a trait of attachment, and support. This shows a continuation of parental

patterns; P2 is following a template created in her own childhood experience, which in turn AC2 wants to take on. Similar findings from Belsky (2005) are parallel to this in showing mothers who experienced supportive and sensitive upbringing would parent in the same manner. Both participants speak with the conscious desire of parenting like their mothers, thus creating a pattern. AC2 speaks of wanting to follow her mother's parenting technique by giving freedom through exploration. Being secure in the knowledge that the mother will be available when needed, she provides active support during exploration; which is key and should be encouraged, not interfered with (Feeney and Woodhouse, 2016; Golding, 2008).

## Theme 2: Growth and Individuation

Another prevalent theme within the data was the growth in the attachment relationship. Personal individuation is key when changing from child, teenager to adult- the partnership may be revised but the attachment is maintained (Crowell et al, 2016; Cicchetti et al, 1990). Bowlby (1988) argued presence of a secure base facilitates a healthy development.

### P1 on her mother:

*"it was hard to speak to her constructively about the things that bothered me (.) Maybe because she never spoke to me about her feelings" (85-87)*

### P1 on her as a mother:

*"Struggled with talking without shouting [...] then mother-daughter bond flourished into friendship too, with time (102-104)*

### AC1 on their adolescence:

*"We would argue. But (.) I guess the worries and issues would still come across, even if they were shouted. Now I'd say it is more dynamic. I have always relied on her for advice."*

In the extract above, P1 and AC1 give accounts on the quality of communication with their mothers during adolescence- both speaking of struggling with constructively sharing their feelings. P1's mental representation of how to communicate emotions have predicted AC1's interactions with her, which is supported by Bowlby's (1988) claims on relationship templates. This corresponds with findings showing negative parenting behaviours are transmitted across generations as well as positive (Conger et al, 2009; Neppl et al, 2009). Her mother's lack of openness may have led to her adapting a similar pattern of communication with her child. Mention of arguments is consistent with previous literature suggesting an increase of conflict in adolescence (Paikoff and Brooks-Gunn, 1991). However, it is seen here that even during unstable times, AC1 says that her distress is made explicit. Previous findings state during adolescence, asking for support is a proximity seeking behaviour (Mikulincer and Shaver, 2016), implying P1 remains a safe haven to AC1, which they can return to for reassurance in times of stress (Bowlby, 1988). Previous studies are coherent with these findings, also reporting the mother remains the provider of a secure base and a safe haven (Rosenthal and Kobak, 2010). Both P1 and AC1 report on growth in the relationship, which has occurred with time- participants exchange negative words

such as ‘*shouting*’ for positive- ‘*dynamic*’, ‘*flourished*’ and ‘*friendship*’. The growth in the parent-child partnership is reported further by P3 and AC3:

P3 on her mother:

*“I got closer to her as a teenager and she found it easier to talk to me”*

*(72-73)*

*“She was as close as my best friend”*

*(86)*

AC3 on P3:

*“we got closer cos I matured as a person and become (.) more of an adult and they were obviously already formed as people. As I learnt more about the world it become easier for us to have a deeper relationship.”*

*(89-91)*

P3’s account above shows how her relationship with her mother grew into friendship, echoing previously mentioned P1 and AC1’s relationship. Participants are aware of the shift in the quality of communication and understanding between oneself and their mother. We see a correspondence suggestive of a pattern in the development of P3’s relationships with her mother and AC3’s growth in relationship with P3 as time goes on. Individual growth and personality development lead the individuals to ‘*have a deeper relationship*’. P3’s account of secure relationship with her mother is matched in her bond with AC3. This gives support to findings reporting that mother’s mental representations of attachment affect the attachment with her child (van IJzendoor, 19985; Fonagy, 1991). The pair above show an optimal attachment relationship, which has grown with time, in accordance with Bowlby (1988) that such bonds, promote healthy development. The importance of a secure attachment in young adults has been illustrated in research linking it with psychological well-being (Cosadine et al, 2013).

Moreover, the organisation of attachment changes with the growth of participants, displayed in P2 and AC2 below.

P2 on her mother:

*“I don’t tell her about...my troubles” (108-109)*

*“I take care of her now, like she took care of me”  
(156-157)*

*She never showed it to the point where [...] there was a time when she took too many pills (135-137)*

AC2 on P2:

*“For some time, I didn’t want to tell her about my panic attacks, I knew she had other worries”  
(92-93)*

Above, in P2 and AC2, there is evidence of a pattern of behaviour. P2 gives an account of keeping her troubles from her mother, as she believes it would cause her stress which is evidently echoed in AC2 keeping her struggle of anxiety from P2. The conscious effort to protect their mothers from possible distress resembles the notion of caregiver's ensuring their child's comfort and security in times of danger as stated by Bowlby (1988). This demonstrates how the adult child may step in to become an adult carer- this role reversal can become the norm with time. In accordance with Magai et al (2016) the caregiver becomes the care seeker ultimately switching roles with the child, showing growth within the attachment relationship. Although roles are revised and attachment organisation changes, Diehl et al (1998) claims that this hierarchal alteration does not affect the child-parent attachment, also stating this occurs to the aging parent. Even within this change in place, there is a clear pattern within the pair, signifying that there is an intergenerational transmission of parental patterns. This pattern extends beyond P2 and AC2, as P2 (above) speaks of how her own mother would try to protect her from problems to a great degree compromising her well-being. This hints at a parental pattern, which corresponds across three generations; which can be explained in terms of IWMs. The relationship patterns between child and caregiver become internalised thus creating expectations and influencing future relationships (Bowlby, 1973; 1988). This finding gives credibility to past research, in which these results correspond (Benoit and Parker, 1994; Hautamaki et al, 2010) also across three generations.

### Theme 3: Trying to create reparative experiences

Comparing responses of mothers (P) and their adult children (AC) revealed a pattern in the way that one generation adapts their views on parenting, based off their early experience. Accounts show attempts to correct their early experience by providing their children with what they feel they lacked.

#### P1 on herself as a mother:

*"I wish I gave her more attention when she was younger, so she knew I was always there. My mother was not so good at that, "*  
(89-91)

#### AC1 on her future children:

*"I would also make sure that I give my children a lot of time [...] that's what my mum didn't do for me. She was always working a lot [...] I wouldn't wanna be like that."*  
(192-196)

In the fragment above, P1 discloses that during her childhood her mother was not attentive to her needs. Similar pattern of parenting behaviour is also shown in AC1's account, which conveys P1 as busy and unavailable. Repetition of P1's mother's parenting behaviour is reflected in her relation with AC1. This gives support to Bowlby's (1973) premise that adverse relations in childhood lead individuals to becoming rejecting parents in similar ways. While this suggests a continuation of insecure parenting patterns, AC1's discourse above shows her wish to break the pattern. Her evident lack of a secure base during childhood has resulted in her consciously wanting to avoid P1's parenting ways, by being an available caregiver to

her future children. This is correspondent with previous literature, suggesting individual who experience suboptimal parenting view own motherhood as positive and a reparative process (Maxwell et al, 2011) and want to treat their own children differently, with the hope of breaking the cycle of poor parenting once experienced (Aparicio, 2017). Through this, AC1's future parenting experience will become reparative, with corrections made to the amount of attention and availability received from P1. This contradicts literature, which states that insecure as well as secure patterns of parenting continue across generations (Conger et al, 2009; Neppl et al, 2009). Consistent findings come from account of P2 and AC2, shown below.

P2 on her mother

*"my mum was sometimes hot-headed and would  
say things that hurt"*

(210)

*"I try not to be hot-headed"*

(216)

AC2 on P2

*"a lot of pressure on me from my mum [...] as a  
parent I would alleviate that pressure and just say:  
do what you enjoy [...] I'd be less restrictive"*

(198-200)

Similarly to P1 and AC1, P2 and AC2 indicate the desire to avoid their mothers' parenting behaviours. P2's negative experience of her mother's quick temper has led to her attempt to be different when parenting. An internalised model of how one should parent forms unconsciously, but literature suggests that one must self-understand and make a consciously break the negative parenting pattern (Siegel et al, 2005). AC2's account suggests that restrictions and high expectations have led her to making a conscious decision to create a reparative experience when parenting own children by maximising their exploration and freedom- which are key in a secure attachment (Bowlby, 1982). This in turn supports the literature.

## General Discussion

The research question was explored through the developed themes. The themes indicate that security and proximity in adult children is matched with their mother's attachment representation, as shown in P3 and AC3. This finding is consistent with previous literature which suggests mother's predict their children's attachment types (Fonagy, 1991; 2010, van IJezendoorn, 1992; 1995). Accounts suggestive of secure parental patterns were evident across the data set. Previous research heavily relies on a mother-infant sample when exploring the correspondence of parenting. The present study fills a gap by using adult children and utilising the AAI allowing a comparison of each question. Through this, the current findings play a important contribution to the knowledge of the intergenerational transmission. Furthermore, the themes indicated that attachment is present across the lifespan and develops as

individuals grow, from child to adolescent to adult. Changes in representations of these attachments was seen, coherent with past findings (Magai et al, 2016; Diehl et al, 1998). During these changes, findings indicated continuation of parental patterns, secure as well as insecure, and extending over three generations. This was similar to previously discussed literature (Benoit and Parker, 1994). While accounts suggested a continuation of parental patterns, it was interesting to find that participant's wanted to consciously break the cycle of parenting patterns. As this area is under researched, the present study plays a useful contribution to this area of attachment.

## **Limitations and Implications**

While the research is grounded in examples which allow better understanding of theme development- a feature of strong qualitative research (Elliott et al, 1999), it is limited by recall bias. This is because participants were asked to recall retrospective experiences. Furthermore, the study was limited due to being small-scale. The study was composed of six participants; therefore, the findings may not be representative of all mothers and their adult children. Qualitative research aims to gain an understanding of experiences and contexts of individuals, however, the contexts of the participants were not taken into consideration when analysing data; which may be limiting to the findings. The contextual factors within the participants' lives were not taken into account, such as maternal social support or single parenthood - which have been found to influence maternal mental representations of the child-mother attachment (Huth-Bocks et al, 2004; 2011). Furthermore, the cultural backgrounds of participants were not taken note of during analysis. Patterns in parenting may vary between participants due to the ranging cultural backgrounds of mothers. In future, when conducting a larger scale study, culture could be a point of research. Qualitative researcher centres on meaning making (Willig, 2017). The researcher, who has preconceived ideas and theories in mind, interprets the experiences. This may have limited the accounts of participants.

Regardless of these limitations, the findings may be of interest in clinical practice. A deeper understanding such correspondence allows for preventive work in the field- e.g. in terms of attachment behaviours. In addition, the findings may help prevent the formation of sub-optimal experiences of being a parent and a child. This can be applied to disadvantaged groups such as refugees who have endured trauma, loss resulting in disturbed internal representation of self and others, by re-internalising positive mental representations. Future research can expand on the findings by exploring the changes in representations of parenting patterns. Understanding the mechanisms behind the continuation of attachment and parenting helps build the picture of us what makes parents act the ways they do.

The present study has explored the presence of parental patterns; yet, simultaneously finding that adult children want to alter their own parenting experience by wanting to be better parents than their own. Future research could explore the reasoning behind the desire to change, an area that lacks research.



While the present study adds to the understanding of the parent-child relationship, more studies are needed to explore the pattern.

## **Reflexivity**

The function of reflexivity is for the researcher to become aware of their impact on the research and influence on the outcomes (Symon and Cassell, 2012), e.g. through motivations and assumptions (Yardley, 2000). Prior to conducting the study, I assumed I would find correspondence in parenting patterns across generations. My expectations arose from findings of past literature which varied in research methods such as observational (Belsky, 2005) and meta-analyses (van IJzendoorn, 1992). Moreover, through my own experience of being a daughter, I concluded I would hope to raise my children with the same level of attention and security I received from my mother. This in turn suggests a pattern. My expectations were met in my findings and were consistent with past research. However, my assumptions and own experiences may have influenced the findings, limiting credibility of the results.

The choice of research question came from my interest in attachment theory, which started at A-level, and carried through into university- where I carried out a qualitative study on secondary attachment figures. Therefore, I believed investigating attachment on a deeper level would be stimulating. Having prior experience and confidence with carrying out qualitative research, as well as awareness of the rich data it provides, influenced by choice of data collection. Nonetheless, the large amount of data on the transmission of parental patterns also led to my adaptation of the AAI interview.

When collecting data, I encountered some issues, e.g. organising interviews with my participants- especially mothers with busy schedules. I felt as though the first interview conducted was not to the same quality as the last, as by the end I felt more confident as a researcher and better oriented in the type of information I needed to gather. Therefore, after some consideration, I redid the interview. The pre-existing relationship with participants allowed for a more open and comfortable atmosphere, however despite this, I remained professional when carrying out the interviews. Furthermore, I believe after completing the research I have come to understand just how complex the topic is. While I have found evidence suggestive of intergenerational transmissions of parental patterns, the findings also indicate that it is not so straightforward.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, the present study explored experiences of mothers and adult children and found evidence suggesting a continuation of parental patterns. It was clear participants unconsciously internalise their early attachment experience, which becomes a foundation for future relationships. However, findings suggest that



experiencing a negative parenting experience compels people to actively create a reparative experience for their future children.

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